

The Persian Empire

The Achaemenid [ah key muh nid] Empire (550–336 BCE), or First Persian Empire, was an empire in Western and Central Asia, founded in the 6th century BCE by Cyrus the Great. The dynasty draws its name from king Achaemenes, who ruled the area that is now Iran between 705 BCE and 675 BCE. The empire expanded to eventually rule over significant portions of the ancient world, which at around 500 BCE stretched from the Indus Valley in the east to Thrace and Macedon on the northeastern border of Greece. The Achaemenid Empire would eventually control Egypt as well. It was ruled by a series of monarchs who unified its disparate tribes and nationalities by constructing a complex network of roads.

At the center of the empire sat the king of kings. Around him was gathered a court composed of powerful hereditary landholders, the upper echelons of the army, the harem, religious functionaries, and the bureaucracy that administered the whole. This court lived mainly in Susa but in the hot summer months went to Ecbatana (Hamadan), probably in the spring to Persepolis, and perhaps sometimes to Babylon. In a smaller version it travelled with the king when he was away in the provinces. The first of the great Achaemenid kings was Cyrus (559-530 BCE) who unified the empire by defeating the Lydians, Greek-Ionians, and Babylonians. His son Cambyses (530-522 BCE) continued the expansion of the empire. Darius I (521-486 BCE) had a famous conflict with the Greek city-states, during which the Persians lost the battle of Marathon in 490 BCE. Darius' son Xerxes (486-465 BCE) also lost to the Greek city-states in three famous battles: Thermopylae, Salamis, and Plataea.

The kings did not rule with total centralized control. The empire was divided up into provinces and the provinces had control over local affairs. The provinces, or satrapies, were ruled by governors (satraps), technically appointed by the central authority but who often became hereditary sub kings, particularly in the later years of the empire. They were surrounded and assisted in their functions by a court modeled on that of the central government and were powerful officials. The great king was nevertheless theoretically able to maintain considerable control in local affairs. He was the last court of appeal in judicial matters. He controlled directly the standing military forces stationed in the provinces, though as time went on, the military and civil authority in the provinces tended to become combined under the satrap. The king was also aided in keeping control in the provinces by the so-called king's eyes, or better, the king's ears, officials from the central government who traveled throughout the empire and who reported directly back to the king on what they learned.

Both the civil and the military administration, as well as public and private trade, were greatly facilitated by the famous royal Achaemenid road system. Communications throughout the empire were better than any previous Middle Eastern power had maintained. The famous road from Susa to Sardis in western Asia Minor is the best known of these imperial highways. It was an all-weather road, maintained by the state. Over it ran a governmental postal system based on relay stations with remounts and fresh riders located a day's ride apart. The speed with which a message could travel from the provinces to the king at Susa was remarkable.

The economy of the empire was very much founded on that king's peace; it was when the peace broke down with ever-increasing frequency during the last century of Achaemenid rule that the economy of the empire went into a decline that undoubtedly contributed significantly to eventual political and military collapse. Wealth in the Achaemenid world was very much founded on land and on agriculture. Land was the principal reward that the king had available for those who gave service or who were in positions of great political or military power in the empire. Much of the land became dominated by elite wealthy families that controlled enormous family estates, often administered by absentee landlords. This problem led to resentment of the upper classes.

Persian leaders invested in and endeavored to encourage trade, a major source of imperial wealth. The effect of the state-maintained road system on the encouragement of trade has already been mentioned. Unfortunately this wealth became concentrated in the hands of the elite, who hoarded the gold that flowed into the empire. Taxes on lower-class Persians were increased to pay for the lifestyles of the wealthy, leading to unrest.

Certainly one contribution of the Persian Empire is the concept of empire, but another is the development of one of the world's first monotheistic religions, Zoroastrianism. Even those who take a close interest in the more exotic or esoteric of religions tend to have a vague grasp on what the followers of the ancient Persian prophet, *Zarathustra* (Zoroaster in Greek) – born around 800 BCE – actually believed. This is a great pity since even a non-believer must be impressed with the evidence of how the religious ideas first expressed by Zoroaster were fundamental in shaping what emerged as Judaism after the 5th century BCE and thus deeply influenced the other Abrahamic religions – Christianity and Islam. Born at a time when the peoples of the Iranian plateau were evolving a settled agriculture, Zoroaster broke with the traditional Aryan religions of the region which closely mirrored those of India, and espoused the idea of a one good God – Ahura Mazda. What became known as Zoroastrianism sounds very similar to Jewish and Christian testaments: heaven, hell, redemption, the promise of a Sashoyant (Messiah), the existence of an evil spirit Ahriman and – most striking of all – the prospect of a final battle for the salvation of man at "the end of time" between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman leading to the latter's final defeat. These ideas are outlined in the book of Zoroastrianism, *Zend Avesta*.

Ultimately, the achievement of the Achaemenid Persians was that they ruled with much creative tolerance over an area and a time that, for both the Middle East and for Europe, saw the end of the ancient and the beginning of the modern world. In one sense, the ancient Middle East died when Cyrus marched into Babylon. Others would argue that its death came when Alexander burned Persepolis. The question remains open. What is clear is that the Achaemenid Empire, the largest anyone had ever yet tried to hold together and one that was not to be surpassed until Rome reached its height. In a sense the Achaemenid Persians passed on a concept of empire that, much modified by others, has remained something of a model throughout history of how it is possible for diverse peoples with variant customs, languages, religions, laws, and economic systems to flourish with mutual profit under a central government. In narrower terms, but for the Iranians themselves no less important, the Achaemenid Empire was the beginning of the Iranian nation, one of the pivotal peoples in the modern Middle East.

Pre-Classical Greece

This revolutionary period in Greek history—and indeed world history—witnessed the rise of the polis, the classical city-state (for instance, Athens, Sparta and Corinth) which would dominate the political scene for several centuries. These quasi-independent communities in their inter-political rivalry elevated Western civilization to unprecedented heights. This epoch, now known as the Pre-Classical Age (800-500 BCE), is also called the Age of Tyrants because powerful individuals came to rule the majority of these city-states by overthrowing the existing regime in a military coup. While our word "tyrant" which comes from the Greek *tyrannos* has strongly negative overtones, the Greek term had in antiquity both negative and neutral connotations, or sometimes even positive ones. That is, not all Greek *tyrannoi* (plural of *tyrannos*) were seen as "tyrannical", some were just lawgivers. Athens had no less than two great lawgivers: Draco at the end of the seventh century (600's) BCE and Solon in the next generation (the early part of the sixth century, ca. 580 BCE). Both have left their imprint on English. A *solon* today means a "politician," and draconian means "extremely harsh or punitive" because Draco was famous for the severity of the punishments his laws imposed.

Because at this time the Greeks began to colonize large parts of the Mediterranean world—in particular, Asia Minor and Sicily (the large island southwest of Italy)—and the coastal regions of the Black Sea as well, this age has also been dubbed the Age of Colonization. In particular, the Greeks settled in large numbers in southern Italy which came to contain so many of them that the later Romans referred to the area as *Magna Graecia* ("Big Greece"). In part because of their essentially Greek heritage, the people and culture of southern Italy and Sicily are to this day very different from those of central and northern Italy.

Classical Greece

The term "classical Greece" refers to the period between the Persian Wars at the beginning of the fifth century BCE and the rise of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE. The classical period was an era of war and conflict—first between the Greeks and the Persians, then between the Athenians and the Spartans—but it was also an era of unprecedented political and cultural achievement. Besides the Parthenon and Greek tragedy, classical Greece brought us the historian Herodotus, the physician Hippocrates and the philosopher Socrates. It also brought us the political reforms that are ancient Greece's most enduring contribution to the modern world: the system known as *demokratia*, or "rule by the people." Led by Athens and Sparta, the Greek city-states were engaged in a great war with the Persian Empire at the beginning of the fifth century B.C. In 498 BCE Greek forces sacked the Persian city of Sardis. In 490 BCE the Persian king sent a naval expedition across the Aegean to attack Athenian troops at Marathon. Despite a resounding Athenian victory there, the Persians did not give up. In 480 BCE the new Persian king sent a massive army across the Hellespont to Thermopylae, where 60,000 Persian troops defeated 5,000 Greeks. The year after that, however, the Greeks defeated the Persians for good at the battle of Salamis.

The defeat of the Persians marked the beginning of Athenian political, economic, and cultural dominance. In 507 BCE the Athenian nobleman Cleisthenes had overthrown the last of the autocratic tyrants and devised a new system of citizen self-governance that he called *demokratia*. In Cleisthenes' democratic system, every male citizen older than 18 was eligible to join the *ekklesia*, or Assembly, the sovereign governing body of Athens. Other legislators were chosen randomly by lot, not by election. And in this democracy, officials were sworn to act "according to the laws what is best for the people." However, *demokratia* did not mean that Athens approached her relationships with other Greek city-states with anything approaching egalitarianism. To protect far-flung Greek territories from Persian interference, Athens organized a confederacy of allies that it called the Delian League in 478 BCE. Athens was clearly in charge of this coalition; as a result, most Delian League

dues wound up in the city-state's own treasury, where they helped make Athens into a wealthy imperial power. In the 450s, the Athenian general Pericles consolidated his own power by using all that tribute money to serve the citizens of Athens, rich and poor. (Generals were among the only public officials in Athens who were elected, not appointed, and who could keep their jobs for more than one year.) For example, Pericles paid modest wages to jurors and members of the *ekklesia* so that, in theory, everyone who was eligible could afford to participate in the public life of the *demokratia*.

Pericles also used the tribute money to support Athenian artists and thinkers. For instance, he paid to rebuild the parts of Athens that the Persian Wars had destroyed. The result was the magnificent Parthenon, a new temple in honor of the goddess Athena at the Acropolis. (Pericles also oversaw the construction of the temple at Hephaestus, the Odeion concert hall, and the temple of Poseidon at Attica.) Likewise, Pericles paid for the annual production of comedic and dramatic plays at the Acropolis. (Wealthy people offset some of these costs by paying voluntary taxes called liturgies.) Dramatists like Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides and the comic playwright Aristophanes all won a great deal of renown for their depictions of relationships between men and gods, citizens and polis, and fate and justice. These plays, like the Parthenon, still epitomize the cultural achievements of classical Greece. Along with the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides and the ideas of the physician Hippocrates, they are defined by logic, pattern and order, and they have in common a faith in humanism above all else. These are the attributes that today are associated with the art, the culture and even the politics of the era. Unfortunately, none of these cultural achievements translated into political stability. Athenian imperialism had alienated its partners in the Delian League, particularly Sparta, and this conflict played out in the decades-long Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE).

The eventual Spartan victory in the Peloponnesian War meant that Athens lost its political primacy, but Athenian cultural life—the essence of classical Greece—continued apace in the fourth century BCE. By the second half of the century, however, disorder reigned within the former Athenian empire. This disorder made possible the conquest of Greece by the Macedonian kings Philip II and his son, Alexander the Great (338–323 BCE.)—a conquest that marked the end of the classical period.

The political and social upheaval caused by the Persian Wars as well as continued strife between Athens and Sparta had at least one unintended consequence. In the 5th century, a flood of new ideas poured into Athens. By the mid-5th century, it had become more common for advanced thinkers to reject traditional explanations of the world of nature and start proving things for themselves through logic and empirical reasoning. Historians now refer to this process as Greco-Roman logic. As a result of the experience of a century of war, religious beliefs declined. Gods and goddesses were no longer held in the same regard as they had been a century earlier.

Socrates (c.469-399 B.C.) was perhaps the most noble and wisest Athenian to have ever lived. He was born sometime in 469, we don't know for sure. What we can be sure about Socrates was that he was remarkable for living the life he preached. Taking no fees, Socrates started and dominated an argument wherever the young and intelligent would listen, and people asked his advice on matters of practical conduct and educational problems. Socrates was not an attractive man -- he was snub-nosed, prematurely bald, and overweight. But, he was strong in body and the intellectual master of every one with whom he came into contact. The Athenian youth flocked to his side as he walked the paths of the agora. They clung to his every word and gesture. He was not a Sophist himself, but a philosopher, a lover of wisdom.

In 399 B.C., Socrates was charged with impiety by a jury of five hundred of his fellow citizens. His most famous student, Plato, tells us, that he was charged "as an evil-doer and curious person, searching into things under the earth and above the heavens; and making the worse appear the better cause, and teaching all this to others." He was convicted to death by a margin of six votes. Oddly enough, the jury offered Socrates the chance to pay a small fine for his impiety. He rejected it. He also rejected the pleas of Plato and other students who had a boat waiting for him at Piraeus that would take him to freedom. But Socrates refused to break the law. What kind of citizen would he be if he refused to accept the judgment of the jury? No citizen at all. He spent his last days with his friends before he drank the fatal dose of hemlock.

Socrates has been described as a gadfly -- a first-class pain. The reason why this charge is somewhat justified is that he challenged his students to think for themselves -- to use their minds to answer questions. He did not reveal answers. He did not reveal truth. Many of his questions were, on the surface, quite simple: what is courage? what is virtue? what is duty? But what Socrates discovered, and what he taught his students to discover, was that most people could not answer these fundamental questions to his satisfaction, yet all of them claimed to be courageous, virtuous and dutiful. So, what Socrates knew, was that he knew nothing, upon this sole fact lay the source of his wisdom. Socrates was not necessarily an intelligent man -- but he was a wise man. And there is a difference between the two.

Socrates wrote nothing himself. What we know of him comes from the writings of two of his closest friends, Xenophon and Plato. Plato was twenty-eight years old when Socrates was put to death.

Plato's greatest and most enduring work was his lengthy dialogue, *The Republic*. *The Republic* discusses a number of topics including the nature of justice, statesmanship, ethics and the nature of politics. It is in *The Republic* that Plato suggests that democracy was little more than a "charming form of government." For Plato, the citizens are the least desirable participants in government. Instead, a philosopher-king or guardian should hold the reigns of power. An aristocracy if you will -- an aristocracy of the very best -- the best of the aristoi.

Plato's most famous student was Aristotle (384-322 B.C.). His father was the personal physician to Philip of Macedon and Aristotle was, for a time at least, the personal tutor of Alexander the Great. Aristotle styled himself a biologist -- he is said to have spent his honeymoon collecting specimens at the seashore. He too was charged with impiety, but fled rather than face the charges -- I suppose that tells you something about Aristotle.

At the age of eighteen, Aristotle became the student at the Academy of Plato (who was then sixty years of age). Aristotle also started his own school, the Lyceum in 335 B.C. It too was closed by Justinian in A.D. 529. Aristotle was a "polymath" -- he knew a great deal about nearly everything. Very little of Aristotle's writings remain extant. But his students recorded nearly everything he discussed at the Lyceum. In fact, the books to which Aristotle's name is attributed are really little more than student notebooks. This may account for the fact that Aristotle's philosophy is one of the more difficult to digest. Regardless, Aristotle lectured on astronomy, physics, logic, aesthetics, music, drama, tragedy, poetry, zoology, ethics and politics. The one field in which he did not excel was mathematics. Plato, on the other hand, was a master of geometry.

It is almost fitting that one of Plato's greatest students ought to have also been his greatest critics. Like Democritus, Aristotle had confidence in sense perception. As a result, he had little patience with Plato's higher world of the Forms. However, Aristotle argued that there were universal principles but that they are derived from experience.